

Chapter Thirty

Christian and Hopeful Snared by the Flatterer

A. The Pilgrims are Subtly Entrapped.

SO they went on and *Ignorance* followed behind. They continued until they came to a place where another path joined in with the straight way. Now this new alternative way seemed as straight as the road to which they had become accustomed. Because of this the pilgrims were undecided as to which way they should take, for each seemed as straight as the other. So they stood still and pondered.¹

And as they were wondering which way to take, a black man, dressed in a light colored robe, approached them;² he then asked the pilgrims why they were standing there. They explained that they were going to the *Celestial City*, but did not know which of the two ways to now take. "Follow me," said the man, "for it is the way in which I am now going." So they followed him along the new way that had joined the old way, though this new path gradually veered away from the *Celestial City* so that they came to be facing the opposite direction. Now as time passed by, before they awakened to their guide's deception, he led both pilgrims into a net that completely closed itself around them. As a result they became so thoroughly entangled that they did not know what to do. Then the white robe fell off the black man's back so that the captives began to understand what had happened.

Alexander Whyte does not paint a too flattering picture of Christian and Hopeful at this stage in view of their imminent humiliation. He comments:

Both Ignorance and Little-faith would have had their revenge and satisfaction upon Christian and Hopeful had they seen those two so Pharisical old men taken in the Flatterer's net. For it was nothing else but the swaggering pride of Hopeful over the pitiful case of Little-faith, taken along with the hard and hasty ways of Christian with that unhappy youth Ignorance, that so soon laid them both down under the small cords of the Shining One.³

1. They present a contrast in predicaments.

Solitary Ignorance is close behind Christian and Hopeful, yet these two contingents present two very different conditions, in spite of what the casual observer might conclude.

¹ *Prov. 14:12.*

² *Prov. 4:19; Eph. 5:11.*

³ Alexander Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, II, p. 24.

- a. Ignorance trails in darkness.

He believes that he walks in the light and is content with his separation. How he avoids the snare that is about to take Christian and Hopeful captive is a matter of conjecture. Did he more readily recognize a false minister of the gospel?

- b. Christian and Hopeful proceed in their vulnerability?

Having theologized at length concerning Little-faith, they feel at ease with themselves having solved another pilgrim's problems. But suppose they were now put to the test concerning a matter they had previously scored at as failures? Might it not now be expected that they would have learned from their earlier failings?

2. They come to a junction of two straight pathways.

Since there is only one way that is truly straight, the pilgrims ought to have realized that one way was a subtle counterfeit, not perfectly straight. Further, such a dilemma should have stimulated extreme caution. Have they so quickly forgotten the cost of following the detour to By-Path-Meadow?

- a. The counsel of the disguised black man.

While the identity of this character has been disputed, the likelihood is that he represents the smooth-talking false pastor, as is the opinion of Sharrock and Keeble.⁴ Note that he recommends a false way, seeks a following, and his masquerade of righteousness, even as Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, covers a dark and apostate interior (II Cor. 11:13-15; cf. Prov. 4:19; Eph. 5:11).

- (1) He is covered with a light robe.

From his name, soon to be revealed, we conclude that his talk quickly beguiles Christian and Hopeful. He seems to exude a wholesome pilgrim spirit and at the same time his conversation congratulates the two travellers concerning their triumphs and progress. There is no probing that would pierce the veneer and expose the inward corruption of this impostor. The pilgrims' guidance here is more sensual than substantive.

- (2) He sympathetically offers to be a guide.

With lips that caress the ego he is able to anaesthetize the mind so that the knowledge of the truth is forgotten. Thus with self-esteem aflame and wisdom in a stupor, Christian and Hopeful are well prepared for following this smooth religious huckster. His simple invitation, "Follow me," receives a hypnotic and unquestioning response. After all, who could possibly doubt that this fine man is headed toward the Celestial City?

⁴ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, eds. Wharey and Sharrock, pp. 335-336; John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. N. H. Keeble, p. 276.

b. The crooked way of the disguised black man.

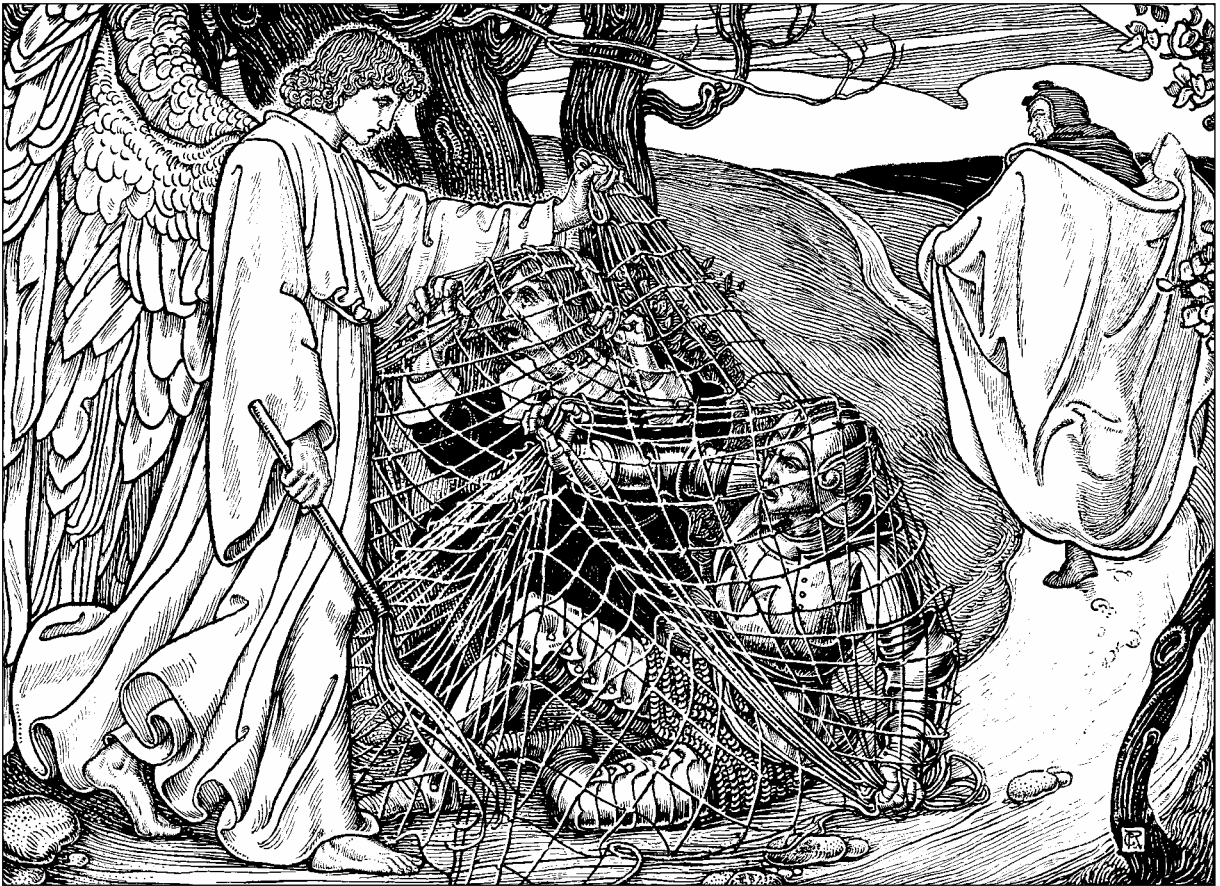
The supposed straight way proves to be increasingly weaving and misleading. Yet the pilgrims blithely follow along being still intoxicated with their leader's "holy" radiance.

(1) The pathway gradually turns and twists.

Here the subtlety of false teachers is well represented. They lead away from the truth incrementally, that is from merely a new way of looking at the truth to an outright denial of the truth.

(2) The pathway veers from the Celestial City.

For all his smooth talking, the Flatterer is a liar. But his distortion of the truth and gentle meandering are so deceptive that the pilgrims are unaware of their being distanced from the Celestial City. Of course a rude awakening must soon confront them.



The pilgrims snared by the Flatterer

c. The entangling trap of the disguised black man.

George Offer writes:

The finest trait in Bunyan's Christian character was his deep, heartfelt humility. He acknowledged that spiritual pride was his easily besetting sin. . . . [Hence on one occasion], having preached with peculiar warmth and enlargement, one of his friends took him by the hand, and could not help observing what a sweet sermon he had delivered; 'Ay,' said he [Bunyan], 'you need not remind me of that, for the devil told me of it before I was out of the pulpit!'⁵

Flattery was, for the Bedford pastor and especially in his preaching role, a foe to be diligently opposed.

(1) Suddenly Christian and Hopeful are caught in a net.

The flattery of the Flatterer is not specified, but taken for granted. The pilgrims obviously embrace the alluring complements by means of which they are unwittingly led to the slaughter. Whyte comments here:

The Flatterer who led the two pilgrims so fatally wrong that day was just their own heart taken out of their own bosom and personified and dramatised by Bunyan's dramatic genius, and so made to walk and talk and flatter and puff up outside of themselves till they came again to see who in reality he was and whence he came, - that is to say, till they were brought to see what they themselves still were, and would always be, when they were left to themselves.⁶

(2) Suddenly the man in white reveals his black nature.

The ruse becomes all too clear; this seeming neighbor was serving himself from the very beginning; he designed to achieve his ends by appealing to human vanity, which the pilgrims were ready to offer; he was not concerned about truth, but manipulation; he felt no remorse when his victims learned of their plight since he had achieved his goal. So the false pastor serves himself, gains a following for himself, and then discards his flock for himself (John 10:10, 12). He has no conscience when it comes to trading in souls as merchandise.

(3) Suddenly Christian and Hopeful awake to their plight.

Their friend proves to be a foe; the flattery was meaningless; the straight way has now become crooked; they are captive rather than free; their joy has turned to sorrow; their hope has turned to despair. Now they have flashbacks concerning their former foolishness with Vain-confidence. Now they remember the warning of the Shepherd. They seem to have learned absolutely nothing and feel it would be presumptive to expect grace to again rescue them. Surely they have played the fool once too often and are certain to be abandoned.

⁵ Bunyan, *Works*, I, pp. lxxvii; lxx.

B. The Pilgrims Repent of Their Folly.

Therefore they lay crying for some time because they did not know how to escape.

CHRISTIAN: Now I understand that I have been caught in an error. Did not the *Shepherds* exhort us to beware of the flatterers? Today we have found to be true that which the wise man has declared, "A man that flatters his neighbor also spreads a net for his feet."⁷

HOPEFUL: They also gave us written instructions showing directions along the way so as to ensure our safe arrival; but we have forgotten to study them, and so have not kept ourselves from the paths of the destroyer. At this point *David* was much wiser than we for he said, "Concerning the deeds of men, by the word of your lips I have kept from the paths of the destroyer."⁸ So they continued to bemoan themselves while lying enmeshed in the net.

Christian the astute theologian becomes Christian the true penitent; he does not attempt to escape responsibility by using the inclusive "we." Though together they make a most sorry pair equally accountable for their predicament.

1. Christian confesses his error.

How true it is that the consequences of our sin take away our blindness to our sin. So here, Christian is quick to awaken to his own foolishness and admit his guilt, even before his pilgrim brother.

a. He ignored the shepherds' warnings.

Whereas one Shepherd warned about one Flatterer, now it seems that a more encompassing caution was given by all of the shepherds concerning many flatterers.

b. He ignored the counsel of the Word of God.

In the sheltered climate of pastoral fellowship he had too lightly regarded the exhortation of Proverbs 29:5. Now he understood the constraint of such a net as never before; now he felt the bondage of his proud heart.

2. Hopeful confesses his error.

Feeling hopeless, he lays no blame at the feet of his more "mature" brother. Rather, now being enlightened to his darkness, he readily owns up to his unqualified negligence.

⁶ Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, II, p. 26.

⁷ Prov. 29:5.

⁸ Ps. 17:4.

- a. He ignored the shepherds' road map.

In other words, as was the case with Vain-confidence, again he avoided consulting with revealed truth and opted for personal opinion. This map would have pointed out the right course when they arrived at the junction of the two seemingly straight paths.

- b. He was deceived by the path of the destroyer.

At one time King David came to such a junction; but he heeded "the word of God's lips" and so was delivered from heading along "the paths of the destroyer" or "the violent" (Ps. 17:4).

C. The Pilgrims are Delivered and Chastened by a Shining One.

The sovereign appearance of a Shining One, a whip in his hand notwithstanding, must have been a welcome even in embarrassing arrival. No doubt he also is white without, though his face and countenance in general seem more akin to other authentic such messengers that they have met with in the past. Further, his ability to lead pilgrims back to the narrow way is authenticating.

The Flatterer



1. By sovereign appointment, deliverance is provided.

At last they noticed a *Shining One* coming toward them with a small whip made of thin cord in his hand.⁹ When he had drawn near to the place where they were ensnared, he asked them from where they had come. They told him that they were poor pilgrims going to *Mount Zion*, but had been led out of their way by a black man clothed in white. “He advised us,” they said, “to follow him since he professed to be going to *Mount Zion* as well.” Then the *Shining One* with the whip responded, “This person was the *Flatterer*, a false apostle, who has transformed himself into an angel of light.”¹⁰ So he tore open the net and let the men out.

Then he ordered them, “Follow me so that I may redirect you back to the way again.” So he led them back to the old straight way which they had left to follow the *Flatterer*. Then he asked them, “Where did you stay last night?” They replied, “With the *Shepherds* on the *Delectable Mountains*.” Then he asked them. “Did they give you written instructions that included a map for the way ahead?” They replied, “Yes.” But the *Shining One* pressed further, “When you came to a halt here, did you refer to the map for guidance?” They answered, “No.” So he asked them, “Why?” They replied, “We forgot.” Then he asked, “Did the *Shepherds* exhort you to beware of the *Flatterer*?” They answered, “Yes, but we did not imagine that this fine-spoken man could possibly be he.”¹¹

This “ministering spirit” has been “sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1:14). And if he is “sent,” that is by divine direction, then his arrival must also be according to divine appointment at the precisely ordered time.

a. A well prepared Shining One appears on time.

This messenger is obviously under orders to carry out specific duties, and thus he comes prepared with a whip in hand. The implication is that the Celestial City continually watches out for the well-being of those pilgrims it anticipates receiving. Which point makes us wonder exactly where Ignorance presently is?

b. A testimony is declared by the sad pilgrims.

With quivering voices, still entangled in the Flatter’s net, they honestly declare how their present predicament arose. However, the messenger’s severe tone of voice and stern manner does not eliminate the worst fear of abandonment.

⁹ *John 2:15.*

¹⁰ Dan. 11:32; II Cor. 11:13-14.

¹¹ Rom. 16:17-18.

- c. A revelation is declared by the Shining One.

He quickly identifies the pilgrims' captor as the Flatterer (Prov. 29:5; Dan. 11:32), a false apostle, who parades as an angel of light (II Cor. 11:13-14). The pity is that Christian and Hopeful did not make good use of this information which was available to them in Christian's book and reiterated by the shepherds.

- d. A release is given by the Shining One.

Revelation from God is always able to cut the cords of flattery that inhibit progress (Ps. 23:3). The overall operation may be painful, but the effect will be a return to useful service, and advance from stagnation.

- e. A return is directed by the Shining One.

The businesslike messenger orders the pilgrims to follow him back to the narrow way. He has probably carried out such a rescue mission as this on many occasions. Hence, Christian and Hopeful are cautiously joyful at being guided back to the way to life. But why has there been no reprimand for their obvious stupidity such Evangelist might dispense?

2. By sovereign appointment, correction is administered.

While the Flatterer seems to have withdrawn, the Shining One determines to deal with his detainees at the proper place, namely the way of righteousness (Prov. 12:28). It is here that he examines, and executes chastisement.

- a. The Shining One interrogates the remorseful pilgrims.

Whereas the pilgrims have previously been corrected, here their evident lack of growth in the area of discernment with strangers requires stronger remedial treatment. Hence, so that the pilgrims may clearly understand why they are about to be disciplined, the details of their imprudent action and consequent accountability are assiduously investigated.

- (1) They confess to receiving the shepherds' counsel.

Specifically, they tell of being given a pastoral road map, that is the Word of God as it applies to dealing with subsequent road conditions. Further, it was highly recommended.

- (2) They confess to forgetting the shepherds' counsel.

They forgot it because it did not rank with them as being of great importance; they thought it was for the less experienced; they felt sufficiently confident in their own intuitive knowledge.

- (3) They confess to being warned about the Flatterer.

But they imagined him to be an easily recognizable character, a plastic or artificial type of individual, and not the smooth and believable gentleman they encountered (Rom. 16: 18).

- b. The Shining One disciplines the neglectful pilgrims.

Then I saw in my dream that the *Shining One* commanded the pilgrims to lie down; having done this, he severely chastised them so as to teach them the good way in which they should walk; and while he was whipping them he declared, "As many as I love, these I also rebuke and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent."¹²

Having done this, he directed them to be on their way and pay particular attention to the other directions of the *Shepherds*.¹³ So thanking him for all of his kindness, they very softly proceeded along the right way,¹⁴ while singing:

Come hither, you that walk along the way;
See how the pilgrims fare, that go astray!
They are caught in an entangling net,
'Cause they good counsel lightly did forget;
'Tis true, they rescued were, but yet you see,
They're scourged as well; let this your caution be.

Bunyan elsewhere comments:

When thou findest that thou art weak here, and failing there, backward to this good, and thy heart forward to that evil; then be sure thou keep a steadfast eye on the mediator of this new covenant, and be persuaded that it is not only made with him, and his part also fulfilled, but that he doth look upon his fulfilling of it, so as not to lay thy sins to thy charge, though he may as a father chastise thee for the same—"If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless: mark, 'nevertheless my loving kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, not alter the thing that is gone out of my lips'" (Ps. 89:30-36).¹⁵

- (1) They are whipped while prostrate.

With divine authority, the messenger commands that the pilgrims submit to chastisement; their submission at this point indicates sonship qualities. Thus they are beaten till it hurts; never again will they be so lax with strangers (Deut. 25:1-2; II Chron. 6:26-27; Heb. 12:5-11; Rev. 3:19).

¹² Deut. 25:1-2; II Chron. 6:26-27; Heb. 12:5-11; Rev. 3:19.

¹³ Prov. 12:28.

¹⁴ I Kings: 21:27; Isa. 38:15.

¹⁵ Bunyan, *Works*, I, p. 553.

- (2) They are exhorted to continue on their journey.

Here is communicated not only fear, but also hope. Both the punishment and the encouragement to press on are reassuring. However, Christian and Hopeful are also exhorted to heed the two remaining exhortations of the shepherds. What do these entail? First, beware of falling asleep upon the Enchanted Ground. Second, pray for God's blessing upon your journeying. In other words, "watch and pray" (Matt. 26:41).

- (3) They accept their correction with gratitude.

What is the kindness that Christian and Hopeful thank the Shining One for? It is the kindness of concern; it is the kindness of deliverance; it is the kindness of correction; it is the kindness of counsel; it is the kindness of encouragement.

- (4) They proceed along the way with contentment.

What matters most to these pilgrims is that they are right with God and heading in the right direction. A properly disciplined child will draw close to its parents. So Christian and Hopeful are now better tempered pilgrims than before their meeting with the Flatterer.

- (a) Contentment is found in their soreness.

This pain reminds them of the treatment that was necessary to sober them up concerning snares along the way. Such spiritual medication at first tasted bitter, but then it felt sweetly beneficial (Heb. 12:11).

- (b) Contentment is found in their singing.

Here is found no hidden resentment, but a melodious rehearsal of their profitable experience. It is but a necessary stanza in a song that will conclude with the pilgrims' qualified arrival in glory.

- (5) Application.

The Lord's woodshed is not a place for tickles and taps. For King Nebuchadnezzar, who professed faith in the God of Israel (Dan. 3:28-30), it meant seven years of severe discipline as a crazy grazing wolf-man, that is until he humbled himself and once again confessed the God of Israel as absolute sovereign over heaven and earth (Dan. 4:34-37). Thus, as strange as a paradox may be, those who experience God's heavy hand and resultant soreness yet learn to sing their new song with increasing fervor.